Big Expectations:
Big Ideas in Honors and Inclusion Classes

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"Big Expectations" discusses the benefits of developing and using big ideas for a diverse set of learners in social studies. Experimenting with both honors and inclusion classrooms at the middle school level, I found that all students are capable of relating to and thinking deeply about the content through the use of big ideas. Although the challenges of standardize testing and differentiated learning initially made me hesitant to try out big ideas in my transition from teaching an honors class to teaching an inclusion class, I came to recognize the importance of showing every student how to form their own answers to the key questions in the curriculum. This is my story of growth and discovery as a new teacher trying to reconcile a teaching philosophy with a complex and unpredictable world of learning.

When I entered in 8th grade as a child on the verge of young adulthood, I did not like social studies. I did not hate it either. In fact, my parents had already taken me on various adventures throughout the United States, as well as to Mexico and France. By the age of twelve, I had seen the Empire State Building, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Smithsonian Museum, the Mayan ruins at Chichen Itza, and the Palace of Versailles. I felt fortunate to have visited these historic places, but social studies in school seemed very different from these personal experiences. I could not reach and out touch what I read in a textbook. It was not motivating to simply read and memorize facts about the past. And, as far as I was concerned, it was a subject area that took a considerable amount of time to study and that did not have any immediate relevance to my life. Science and math were much more practical and easier for me to grasp. Besides, what did the past have to do with me?

But then I had a social studies teacher that brought the past to life and made me understand how to be an effective teacher. We memorized and took the Oath of Office, created our own governments and currency systems, negotiated as a union with employers for a better contract, and pretended to be news reporters on the *Maine* incident. Our unit on World War I involved a mock participation in trench warfare. This was not the type of social studies class to which I was accustomed. The teacher made us want to work both inside and outside of class. I did well and I wanted to know more about the past. And so began my love for social studies and my interest in teaching.

I continued to take more social studies classes in high school and, in college, majored in history and adolescence education. I found a love for a subject area at a young age and could not resist learning more about it. I took trips to England, Arizona, Quebec, South Carolina, and various historic sites around New York State. I rented and watched historic movies and movies based on historic events. I even wrote some short historical fiction stories based on what I was learning in my social studies classes. I was obsessed and I could not let go. I promised myself that I would never forget what a great inspiration my social studies teachers had been to me and how they had helped to shape the course of my life. Student teaching gave me my first opportunity to experiment with different teaching philosophies and share my love for social studies with young minds.

And, initially, I did not forget. Having learned about constructivism and collective learning experiences in my college education classes, I enthusiastically applied these theories during my student teaching placements. I created a lesson for Advanced Placement U.S. Government classes at my high school placement that allowed students to work in groups to debate their positions about their views of lobbying and interest groups. I was amazed by the maturity and the detail with which these students executed their arguments. What began as simply a lesson on lobbying turned into a basis for a larger discussion of the existence and effectiveness of interest groups. By the end of the unit, students seemed to feel confident in their social studies skills, as well as comfortable with using the terminology and ideas associated with the main topic. I blended this style of teaching with lecture and discussion in order to delve into other key ideas of the AP U.S. Government curriculum.

Later, at my middle school placement, I developed an activity for 7th grade classes that allowed them to analyze the extent to which Lewis and Clark accomplished the goals set forth by President Jefferson. Looking at primary and secondary documents, students worked in cooperative learning groups to determine the goals of the mission and then to rate Lewis and Clark in their effectiveness in achieving these goals. The students were not only able to determine the goals of the mission, but also to support their rating score for Lewis and Clark with specific, logical reasons. When groups did not agree on the score, we tried to account for these discrepancies and determined an overall class rating for the explorers based on group ratings. The students seemed to enjoy participating in this historical analysis and were very competitive in defending their answers. I was astonished that twelve-year-olds could be so reflective and

creative with social studies, but I was not completely surprised. Somehow, I had the feeling that they were capable of the work and perhaps had not been given many opportunities to be actively involved the process of learning.

After completing my undergraduate degree, I felt that I was ready to begin my career as a teacher. I knew that I had a strong pedagogical background and was well-versed in the discipline of social studies, but I also recognized my lack of experience in the classroom and understood that there was considerable room for growth in my teaching practices. I was nervous and excited about showcasing my ideas for different students and learning environments. In an era of assessment-driven learning, I was afraid that my constructivist philosophy would seem idealistic and impractical. However, I knew that the school at which I needed to work would accept me and view my teaching style as an asset rather than a drawback.

After several interviews, I found the perfect match. I received a position as an 8th grade social studies teacher at Depew Middle School. During my first year, I was assigned to teach the second half of a two-year course on U.S. history to four regular education classes and one honors class. I was enthusiastic about working with the school's curriculum and hoped to be able to bring lessons to my students that would keep them engaged and make social studies meaningful for them. I was ready to embark on my first experiment in full-time teaching.

The Working Environment

The Depew Union Free School District is located in a small, suburban village of Buffalo, NY. There are less than 2,500 students in the entire district, 96% of which are white. There are only a few students of African American or Asian American background. Despite the lack of racial diversity in the village, the socio-economic status of the families in the district is quite varied. For example, about 20% of the students in the district are eligible for a free lunch. There is no class tension visible in the school, but the mix of blue-collar and white-collar community members becomes quite clear as students begin to talk about what their parents do for a living and what supplies they can afford for the school year. From my experiences, I have gladly noticed that there is no correlation between socio-economic class and academic success. With the help of the caring teachers in this district, students who want to work hard and are willing to learn will do so under any circumstance.

As far as academics are concerned, the school performs at a comparable level within the range of similar schools in the area. Most students receive proficient scores, though reading and writing tasks sometimes prove difficult for students at the 8th grade level. Nevertheless, the district has the financial resources to invest in programs to continue improving upon these scores. Also, there is great administrative encouragement for purchasing new technology, including the Classroom Performance System student response pads, Smart Boards, laptop carts, and various Internet programs that allow for the creation of wikis and blogs. Furthermore, since average class sizes are about 20 students, children have an opportunity to work closely with their peers and teachers. There is no concern about having too many students in one class or about individual students being neglected because of large class sizes. Finally, as the teachers in Depew are relatively young, with an average level of experience at twelve years, the staff welcomes and encourages the use of current teaching practices.

Most importantly, the district is extremely supportive of the academic freedom of its teachers. There is even a clause in the union contract that protects each teacher's right to make final decisions on grading policies, formative and summative assessments, and implementation of a variety of pedagogical methods. Our teachers are treated as professionals and are allowed to make informed decisions based on student interests and needs. Curriculum maps and guides have been developed and are utilized, but teachers are free to structure unit and lesson plans as they desire. And while the middle school and district administrators place an emphasis on improving state test scores in the intermediate level core subject areas, they are not driven by these numbers alone. The social development of students is considered to be equally as important as their academic development. Therefore, as the school mission statement reads,

> It will stress the development of the whole child by instilling in students a sense of positive self-worth, self-respect, and self-confidence and a belief that each can succeed. Depew Middle School, in cooperation with families, will provide students with the necessary academic and personal/social knowledge, skills, and attitudes to succeed in the middle-level grades, high school and beyond.

Basically, Depew Middle School is a teacher's dream school. The classroom is a place where teachers can utilize different pedagogical practices and help students to develop the academic and social skills necessary for success in high school. While there are formal evaluations throughout the year connected to standards and the content, as long as teachers show

that what they are doing is related to clear goals and is meaningful for students, no one questions their professional judgment. There is a great sense of respect for teachers in Depew, which I think is probably not found in most districts today. Administrators, parents, and community members regard teachers as important and intelligent members of society responsible for shaping the lives of their children.

The Experiment

During my first year of teaching, I wanted to apply everything that I had learned in college. I was not confident that my regular education students would be capable of handling the work, so I began my experiments with constructivism in my honors class. There were only twelve students in the honors class, and they seemed bright and energetic. I decided, if the lessons were successful at the honors level, then I would modify them for the remaining four classes and analyze the results. I believed that I could eventually bring the regular education classes up to the level of the honors students and push the honors students to work with even more complex and detailed concepts. Having worked with Advanced Placement students before, I had high expectations for my own students.

Beginning with a unit on the causes of the Civil War, I started to get a feel for how much experience students had with being actively involved in their learning process. In one of my first lessons, I found documents pertaining to difficult opinions on the issue of slavery and asked the students to determine the pros and cons of slavery. At first, the honors students did not know what to do. They were not having difficulty reading or understanding the documents. They just did not know why there were different perspectives on the issue. They believed that slavery was wrong and had a hard time finding a reasonable explanation for someone to support it. They did not understand how someone could justify the existence of such a terrible institution. As I had only planned the lesson for a 40 minute period and the class was still working on document analysis, I began asking questions to refocus them and get them to see the issue from the perspective of a slave or slave owner. Most students were still acting confused. By the end of the period, everyone was frustrated, including me. I simply could not comprehend what went wrong. The students appeared to be smart enough to interpret the documents, but they were having trouble understanding the historical context in which the documents were written.

That evening, I spent some time further reflecting on my honors lesson. As I thought about it more, I realized that I had spent so much time focusing on the activity that I had not clearly stated the goals and objectives of the lesson. Also, I had not taken into account their personal experiences and the extent to which 8th graders think about the world in terms of themselves. This is not to say that my students were self-centered, but that I had not given them any means by which to connect to the past. This was not a government or economics class that I could easily relate to today's world. It was U.S. history and not recent at all. They needed me to do something to better help them reach out to the past.

It was then that I began thinking about one of the methods courses I had taken in college. I remembered the professor teaching about the GAP method of creating lesson plans. This involved thinking of the goal (G) of the lesson first before the assessment (A) and plan of action (P). The goal had to be general enough to encompass the subject area content, as well as the significance of the lesson. I had automatically written my honors lesson plan this way, but I realized that I had forgotten the main point of the GAP system of lesson design: to make sure that all parts of the lesson were focused on the goal. I must have been so excited to try out the activity that I had not made the goal clear to my students. They were fumbling through the document analysis not only because they had no idea why they were doing it, but also because they could not see why it was important to understand the concept of perspective in studying history.

Before class the next day, I redesigned the lesson to focus on a specific goal. I wanted the honors students to consider both sides of the argument on slavery and I decided that the lesson goal would be to determine whether or not slavery was a necessary evil during the antebellum period. This would allow me to draw upon their perception of slavery as an evil institution, but also to help them consider the possibility of understanding that slavery might have been viewed as necessary or even helpful to some people in the past. However, I decided that students would have an easier time connecting to the overarching goal of the lesson if I first posed the following personal questions at the beginning of class, "Think of an argument that you had with someone. What reasons did you give to support your ideas? What reasons did he or she give to support his or her ideas? Who was 'right' and who was 'wrong'? Explain." I had my students write their answers for a few minutes and then asked them to share their responses with the class.

Almost everyone raised their hand and talked about their experiences with parents, friends, and relatives. Most agreed that each side of the argument in which they were involved had legitimate concerns, but that it was difficult to reach an agreement because each person wanted his or her own needs to be met. As a result, the majority of students said that neither side was completely right or wrong – they just had different perspectives and, therefore, different opinions. This discussion also brought up the ideas of compromise and appeasement, which we would be addressing quite soon as we moved closer to the unit on the Civil War. I suddenly felt much better about trying the document task again, with some slight modifications. It seemed as though my students were beginning to see that perspectives on an issue changed depending on the individual person.

After this ten-minute task, I brought out the documents from the previous day and asked students to move into their groups. I explained that they needed to categorize the documents into those that supported slavery and those that opposed it. I then wrote the following question of the lesson on the board: "Was slavery a necessary evil or just plain evil?" We discussed the meaning of the phrase "necessary evil" and I explained the next activity for the lesson. I wanted students to draw a T-chart on the group white board, with one side labeled as "necessary evil" and the other side labeled as "plain evil". They would use information from the documents to fill out specific ideas that supported each point of view on the issue of slavery. When they were finished with this task, the group then needed to come to a decision about their answer to the question and be able to explain their choice using specific examples.

Walking around, I saw that the more focused GAP plan had worked. With a clear goal in mind and a little more guidance in analyzing the documents, the groups were hurriedly jotting down details from the documents in the appropriate columns of the T-chart. When I asked students to individually explain why these ideas fit under each category, they could give me specific reasons and relate it back to the person who had written the document. At the end of class, each group shared its findings and gave an answer to lesson's question. Many groups chose to say that it was perceived as a necessary evil for those who owned slaves or who had a positive experience as slaves, but that it appeared to be just plain evil to those who had negative experiences as slaves or who had witnessed the cruel treatment of slaves. Since I did not support any particular answer to the question, I placed value on the students' judgment and reasoning. As

long as their ideas were clear and could be backed up with evidence from the documents, I did not feel the need to intervene in the presentation of their group's findings.

Though I did not realize it at the time, I had stumbled upon the world of "big ideas" for lesson planning. Instead of focusing exclusively on the teaching of content, I had attempted to find a broader question or idea that students could connect with. By asking students to relate arguments in general to analyzing the validity of different historical arguments with respect to a specific topic, I had been able to make the content meaningful and open to evaluation. It seemed that the students had enjoyed answering an open question about the topic instead of simply memorizing and regurgitating information. I had not told them what to think, but had given them ownership over their own knowledge and comprehension of the material.

Throughout the rest of the year, I made sure to include activities that were focused on "big ideas" or that placed students in a historical situation. These were interspersed with more traditional methods of teaching in order to pace the delivery of the content. I kept the history in chronological order, but created individual lessons the centered around general themes. When learning about late 19th century immigration, students were asked to analyze the positive and negative experiences of different immigrant groups that came into America, as well as examine nativist attitudes within the U.S. towards immigrants. Once again, this required students to challenge notions of "right" or "wrong" perspectives in history through a big idea: "Was immigration positive or negative? For whom? Why?" To teach about the nature of and the fight for civil rights, I asked students to research and assume the personas of different leaders in civil rights movements of the 20th century. This included African Americans, Hispanics, and women. We had a round-table discussion on the value of basic citizens' rights and the means by which citizens can best maintain and defend their rights. This taught students not only to examine the importance of civil rights in terms of their own lives, but also to consider the best ways to communicate with and gain support the fight for change.

When I taught about the First World War, I created a unit based upon a big idea, "Was the first World War worth fighting for?" During the unit, I had students participate in mock trench warfare, research the pros and cons of the new weapons used during the war, and study the statistics of the war in terms of damages and deaths. In the end, we were able to discuss whether or not the First World War was worth fighting from several perspectives. I liked how the

honors students reacted to these lessons and, as a result, I modified them and implemented them in the regular education classes at a more basic level during the year.

There was a little bit of resistance at first because the regular education students did not know how to approach the big ideas. When I asked them to consider broader analyses of topics in discussions and essays, they thought that I was looking for specific answers and kept asking me whether or not they had the correct answers. In a unit on the Civil Rights Movement, I remembered trying to teach the concept of civil rights to students using Supreme Court cases related to student rights in schools as examples. I was surprised to find that students had no concept of their own rights in school, but they seemed to enjoy reading about, and reenacting parts of, the cases. When I prompted them to explain whether or not children actually have civil rights, the students were silent. I knew from the lesson that they understood the concept of civil rights and had plenty of examples to reference. Someone finally raised their hand and asked, "So, what's the right answer?" I was horrified. I questioned whether or not I had just wasted 40 minutes of class time. I tried to rephrase the prompt, adding that students could use examples learned in class to explain *their thoughts* on the subject. Some brave students volunteered their ideas and I simply listened, occasionally asking for them to justify their responses. Once my students saw that I was not belittling them or correcting their explanations, more raised their hands and shared their answers. It was not exactly what I was looking for, but it was a start. At least the students knew that I valued their ideas and could express their thoughts in a safe environment.

After experiencing a few lessons centered on big ideas, they began to realize that they would need to be able to determine the answers on their own and use details to support their answer. I was able to begin assigning regular journal entries based on the big ideas learned in class. Throughout station and cooperative learning activities, students even began to develop their own "big ideas" about the documents and ideas presented in class. They began to understand the concepts of personal perspective and historical context. I felt comfortable challenging these students and I discovered that they had some interesting ideas to share.

During a lesson on the changing culture during the 1920s, with a focus on the question of whether or not there was a "return to normalcy" after the First World War, one student made a connection between the past and the present without my prompting. She said that the new fashions, music, and literature must have been shocking to previous generations, just like the

trends of today often make parents and grandparents feel that the "good old days" are gone. The thought had crossed my mind, but I did not think to emphasize it in the lesson because perhaps the students had not experienced this. Every year when I reach that unit, I make sure to generate a question or two to help students relate to the Roaring Twenties.

By the end of the year, I was happy with what I had accomplished both in the honors and regular education classes. The students seemed to retain information well, though they still had a bit of trouble keeping events in chronological order, and were good at explaining and writing about historical documents. They had a voice in what they were learning and they were proud of it. My experiment had not been perfect, but it had generally worked and made me confident that I could continue to improve on my lesson plans for future years. Then I found out in June that I would be switching from the honors team to the inclusion team. This was done for several reasons, none of which involved anything that I had done or failed to do. The switch not only made me nervous, as I had never taught special education students before, but also hesitant to continue on the path that I had started. I did not know of the capabilities of these students. With this unexpected change, I began to abandon what I had accomplished over the past year and forgot about the progress that I had made with teaching with big ideas.

The Pressure is On

When I first switched from teaching my small class of honors students to teaching an inclusion class with twice as many students and a consultant teacher during my second year, I was convinced that my use of big ideas and hands-on activities would no longer be feasible on such a frequent basis. How were students with disabilities going to handle generalizations and abstract ideas? How was I going to manage such a big class and still accomplish what I had tried out the year before? I naively believed that they would only be able to grasp the content to some extent and would struggle thinking deeply about it.

Since the set of students this year were academically low, and generally lacked confidence with skills in social studies, I felt less confident about my teaching methods. The big ideas caused a great deal of confusion and resistance for some classes. There was only one class that consistently performed well with these and I was able to continue expanding my pedagogical practices with them. With only the safe haven of my self-proclaimed "honors" regular education group, I became frustrated and started to panic about the intermediate social studies assessment.

After seeing that it was taking the majority of my students a longer time to process and remember social studies concepts, I discarded many of the big ideas that I had created my first year and started to focus on covering the content.

This did not mean that I rejected my activities and ideas from the previous year, but that I did not use them as often in developing and implementing lessons. There were still lessons that involved role playing and connections between the past and the present, but not as many as the amount that I had experimented with months before. And they were not necessarily connected to big ideas; they were sometimes more about the activity itself than the overarching theme of the lesson or unit. In the process, I became consumed with the fear of teaching all of the material covered on the assessment. My expectations lowered for my students and, with it, my confidence in my teaching practices declined as well. The kids still learned a great deal about U.S. history, but they had not experienced history the way I had wanted them to. I had given them breadth, not depth, of material.

By the end of the year, I was exhausted and somewhat disillusioned. What had happened to me and all that I had once supported in education? Would all of my future classes be this academically challenging? Would this obsession with standardized testing and school assessment ever go away? When was I going to be able to teach again like I did before? Little did I realize that help was just around the corner – in the form of a graduate studies class at Buffalo State College. In pursuit of my master's degree, I found the motivation to come back to big ideas again.

The Epiphany

During the fall semester of 2007, I began a required graduate course in social studies education entitled *Teaching Social Studies*. The professor seemed very enthusiastic and open to current ideas about pedagogy. After the first few meetings, I began to see that her support of constructivist teaching and the importance of emphasizing multiple perspectives coincided with my classroom ideals. I particularly liked the prologue reading on *The Strange Death of Silas Deane* and our discussion about the Jacksonian Era. In the former reading, authors Davidson and Lytle (2000) presented a complex historical case to show just how subjective history can be. They showed that historians may never know exactly how Silas Deane died because they only have personal documents from which to select and analyze. These documents could be

exaggerated, incorrect, or just a matter of opinion. As a teacher, I had always wanted to emphasize that history could only be an approximation of multiple perspectives, not an exact truth. Until I read this article, I had forgotten how important this idea was to me and to my teaching philosophy. I began to think that a modified version of this story could serve as the basis of discussion for a few lessons, but then I wondered just how much time I would "waste" with an activity that had little to do with the state test. I was uncertain about whether my students would even understand what I was trying to accomplish.

Similarly, our class discussion on the Jacksonian Era opened my eyes to a new way of constructing a unit, but I was hesitant to implement the practice. After reading several conflicting articles on Andrew Jackson, the professor had the class consider the persona of the "real" Andrew Jackson. Was he a hero who had made important decisions during the War of 1812 and who, as president, worked hard to champion egalitarianism? Or was he a villain who tried to manipulate the system to get his way and who destroyed the lives of Native Americans? It was hard to come to a consensus because each reading showed a different side of Jackson and emphasized unique qualities about him. The most confusing part was that they were all historically sound pieces of research. I thought that the theme of "hero or villain" sounded like a great idea for a unit because there were no correct views on the issue. I just was not sure how practical it would be to apply within my time limit to prepare for the assessment. She also brought up the question of why the New York State curriculum has an entire unit entitled the Jacksonian Era. No other president has an era named after him. There is no Roosevelt Era, no Kennedy Era, no Bush Era. Why did Jackson get all of the attention? Once again, I recognized that this was an important concept for my students to understand. However, as far as I was concerned, it was not realistic for me to even consider using in my classroom. My kids probably would not be able to comprehend it.

Despite all of these great ideas, I still struggled to see how these ideals could be accomplished with so many curricular constraints and standardized assessments. I could not always teach what I wanted to teach. I was not teaching an elective. I had no power over the content or the assessment. I could not control which students were placed in my classroom. I would just have to accept that these ideas were best practices and not meant for me to use in the real world. Maybe when the focus on standardized tests disappeared, I would be able to experiment with these educational theories.

Then, one night during this class, I finally had an epiphany. The class was discussing a reading about a young teacher in a local school district. Instead of focusing exclusively on the assessment, she had gone above and beyond what needed to be taught for the test. She had developed units focused on big ideas, created lessons based on student interest, and generally expected a great deal from her students. Her students not only enjoyed the class and felt empowered by the ways in which she chose to teach them, but also succeeded on the state assessment. At one point in the discussion, someone brought up a question about the emphasis that many districts place upon teaching to the test and how much we would really be able to teach like this woman without being criticized. I remember the professor looking at all of us and saying, "Some teachers are scared to move away from teaching to the test. But shouldn't you be scared not to?"

It was as if someone had jolted me awake from a nightmare. I thought about what I had done to my classroom just because of one academically low class of students and because I was afraid of how my special education students would react to being challenged in new ways. Suddenly, I knew that I had made a mistake. I had seen students struggling with the large, overarching questions and I had not thought to take the time to show students how to work with big ideas. I had been impatient and, as a result, had abandoned what would have probably helped these students to connect to and understand the content in a more global way. They were not going to always comprehend or remember all the specific details of history, but they were capable of grasping main themes and thinking actively about the past. I could not go back and change what I had done, but I could do something about my classroom now. The school year had just begun a month before, and I had plenty of time to make a difference.

After I came home from class, I rushed to my computer and began typing up a proposal for change. I designed a contract for my students to sign that explained how class would be structured from now on. I wrote how there would be less document-based essay question (DBQ) practice tests, pen-and-paper tests, and lectures. We would be doing more hands-on activities, more units based on big ideas, and more authentic assessments. The one condition was that they needed to put forth their best effort and be willing to work on some challenging tasks in class. Everyone in every class would sign a class contract and I would keep each copy for future reference. I had decided that, if I did not implement these changes right way, I would never do so. I was a little nervous about restructuring my units and lessons, but I knew it was for the

better. I had two inclusion classes this year and I was not going to underestimate the abilities of the special education students this time. I would adjust my ideas as needed, but not resign myself to simply covering the content.

In the morning, I went to my classroom and immediately rearranged the desks. They had been in rows and now I moved them into a "U" shape for discussions. I then found bags of short Popsicle sticks, which I had shoved into cabinet in the back of the room, and looked at them again. I had always wanted to use Popsicle sticks to draw names for class discussion and group placements. I would have each student fill one out and use it today for the lesson on elections. Amazingly, most students welcomed the proposal for change and thought that the Popsicle sticks were an interesting idea. One student even mentioned how open and inviting the room looked now with the desks in a new formation. For the remainder of the class, we looked at documents and had a long discussion on some key questions related to elections. The goal of the lesson was to have students determine whether or not the U.S. government should reform election practices and policies. Since I was not looking for a specific answer for any of the questions, students felt comfortable considering all of the options for each question. These were not simple questions at all. For example, in one inclusion class, we spent almost the whole class talking about whether or not third parties should exist since they do not often win seats in Congress or the presidential vote. To say the least, I was at once shocked and satisfied. It felt like my first year all over again.

Soon, I started use big ideas to construct each unit. Instead of simply following history in chronological order, I began to group events and people based upon themes. Working with the other 8th grade social studies teacher, I helped to develop a new experimental curriculum. I had told him about what I had learned in my graduate class and how it could actually improve our assessment scores by making students think globally about what they were learning. As he also had a broad range of students at different academic levels, he was open to the idea and we promised to exchange thoughts on the success of our big idea units.

Using the New York State social studies curriculum, as well as my students' interests and needs, I restructured my units as follows:

Big Ideas Unit/Question	**Correlation with New York State Curriculum**
To what extent have the lives and rights of African Americans changed after the Civil War? Have they gotten better, worse, or have stayed the same?	Unit 6: Division and Reunion, Unit 7: An Industrial Society; Unit 9: The United States Between the Wars, Unit 11: The Changing Nature of the American People from World War II to the Present
Survivor: America! Western Migrants vs. Immigrants. (What challenges did each of these groups face and who had better strategies with which to meet these challenges?)	Unit 7: An Industrial Society
How has our economy changed over the past 100 years? Are we better off than we once were in terms of labor rights, consumer safety, and economic security?	Unit 7: An Industrial Society, Unit 9: The United States Between the Wars
War: What is it Good For? (What makes a war justifiable? What makes us perceive that a war is either "good" or "bad" for America and other countries?)	Unit 8: The United States as an Independent Nation in an Increasingly Interdependent World, Unit 10: The United States Assumes Worldwide Responsibilities, Unit 11: The Changing Nature of the American People from World War II to the Present
Can we trust the government and the Constitution to protect our individual rights?	Unit 11: The Changing Nature of the American People from World War II to the Present

At first, the students were a bit perplexed when we moved from one unit to the next because they were used to covering different time periods in order. I remember one student saying, "Wait, Miss Foels! Didn't we just talk about the 1960s and now we're back in the 1800s? I'm lost." However, I remained patient and slowly helped them to see that we focusing on themes instead of eras. I kept the big idea question on the board throughout each unit so that students could refer to it as needed, and I created journal entries that required students to start reflecting on the theme of the unit as we continued learning more about it. I refused to allow students to fail at these tasks and they succeed.

Conclusion

Though it was initially difficult to change how I thought about and constructed units in this normally chronological course, I was surprised at how easy creating big ideas became over time. After completing my first unit, and seeing that students were able to successfully

demonstrate their understanding of the big idea, I was excited to develop more units. Most importantly, I realized that no one was left out of the learning experience. Both regular education and special education students were actively participating in our more student-centered class. The units seemed to help students at a variety of academic levels understand the general themes that appear in U.S. history and made it easier for them to connect specific details together to better memorize facts for the assessment.

Of course, this would not have been possible without the constant support of my colleagues, including the other 8th grade social studies teacher and my two consultant teachers. Thanks to their flexibility and understanding that this change in the curriculum was an experiment for the benefit of the students, I was able to transform theories into realities. In the end, they agreed that the themes worked well, especially for special education students who might have had difficulty keeping track of information based solely on chronology. Furthermore, while our assessment scores did not change significantly from previous years, we recognized the importance of making history more meaningful and relevant to students. On an exit survey at the end of the year, most students reported that they felt that had learned to think about history more in my class and they had felt the themes were useful for organizing and discussing social studies concepts. Those comments were more important to me than any assessment scores could ever have been.

At the beginning of the year, I always decorate my bulletin board with inspirational quotes to motivate students. From now on, there is one that I will be very proud to post up each year because I can relate to it after restructuring my classroom. It is a quote from Mahatma Gandhi that reads, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." Instead of attempting to improve scores by teaching to the test, we as teachers really need to start considering what ideas and skills are important for students to understand in social studies. In essence, the test is merely one measure of our students' knowledge and does not have as much absolute value as perceived by those in the educational community. It is our job to make history important and interesting for our students. We cannot blame our problems and fears on a test. We must embody students with the power to think and to love learning, to see that they have the ability to shape the future. So be the change you wish to see. Start experimenting with more meaningful big ideas in your classroom. Wouldn't you be scared not to?

References

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